

“Leading on the Creative Edge”

Gaining Competitive Advantage Through the Power of Creative Problem Solving

Roger L. Firestien, PhD

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Summary by Bob Littell, Chief NetWeaver – with permission of the author

Foreward – Why I believe this work is so significant – **Bob Littell**

For those of you who have attended one or more of our “**Don’t Need to Read the Book**” book club meetings, you know by now that two of the key elements behind this book club concept have to do with **NetWeaving**: 1) helping people get to know each other below the superficial level, which I have found that book clubs do very successfully; 2) helping people ‘**follow up**’ and ‘**follow through**’ by emphasizing the importance of getting with one or more of the people whom you meet at the book club meeting, either to have a one-on-one ‘**post-meeting**’ meeting just to keep the relationship growing, or even better to ‘**host**’ a followup meeting to introduce your new ‘**friend**’ to someone he or she would benefit meeting.

To me the most rewarding part of these book club meetings is hearing some of the success stories from these follow up meetings which are taking place.

Some of you are also familiar with my newest book, “**Raising Your R&R Factor – How Referable and Recommendable Are You?**” (www.unibook.com) This book emphasizes that ‘**referrals**’ represent a RISK on the part of the person making it and sometimes, if someone doesn’t see enough that is ‘**different**’, ‘**unique**’, or better yet. . **.REMARKABLE** about you, even with NetWeaving, it may not result in ‘**returned**’ favors or introductions.

So how do you become more different, unique, or remarkable? Recently I spoke at a meeting in Sante Fe, New Mexico, at which time I heard another speaker, Roger Firestien, PhD, an associate professor at the International Center for Studies in Creativity at Buffalo State College, Buffalo, NY, speak on creativity and innovation. He gave a great talk and took the group through a number of fun exercises and this Book Summary is going to be a combination of Roger’s book which I hope you will purchase – “**Leading**

on the Creative Edge” – along with some observations and explanations of some of the exercises we did in his workshop. It’s readily available on Amazon.com.

You will experience some of the ‘individual’ and ‘company’ as you attend the actual book club meeting and take part in the exercises.

Introduction – Winning in the Marketplace

In today’s environment, even much more so than when Roger Firestien first wrote this book, innovation and creativity are **THE** key differentiators, NOT ONLY for **companies** but maybe even more importantly in today’s job environment, for **individuals**. . .in order to differentiate themselves and NOT be the ones caught in a downsizing or cutbacks.

Quoting Firestien:

“The fact is, the only competitive edge you have is how you harness the creative energies of the people who work with and for you to develop new approaches to problems and implement solutions that work. Creative Problem Solving has never been more important than today.”

Chapter 1 – The Key to Your Company’s Success

Firestien concludes that the behavior of leaders is the critical element in creativity (or lack thereof) within an organization or company. To support that he quotes Goran Ekvall of the University of Lund, in Sweden:

“Sixty-seven percent of the statistical variance accounted for on the climate for creativity in organizations is directly attributed to the behavior of the leader.”

Speaking to leaders, Roger’s direct and blunt message:

“Leader. . .the cold hard truth is that your behavior is the single most important factor in determining whether the people who work for you will be creative”.

According to Firestien, leaders either “*facilitate the process and support their people in developing their ideas and implementing new approaches for solving problems*” or they are eventually doomed to “*obsolescence and eventual collapse*”.

He quotes a study from Brandweek Magazine concerning the odds of creating a breakthrough product which will actually meet the company’s marketplace objectives.

- 39% of product proposals actually begin the development process
- 17% of those proposals complete the development process
- only 8% are eventually introduced to the market

- a tiny 1% ever go on to meet the company's stated objectives.

"This translates into a 'waste of 99 percent'".

So how do leaders thwart the process?

According to a innovation survey Firestien quotes from Group EFO, Ltd. Of Weston, Connecticut

- 63% of new product marketers say top management does not have a clear strategic vision of the role of new products.
- 65% say top management does not make a significant contribution to finished product concepts.
- 35% actually wishes top management was less involved than it is!

The last statistic reminds me of one of my favorite TV ads. A group is sitting around a table with the **'leader'** sitting at the head of the table. They're brainstorming and one of the more 'nerdy' participants makes a suggestion which everyone pretty much ridicules as foolish. Then the leader repeats exactly what the 'nerdy guy' just said and everyone exclaims – **"BRILLIANT"**!

The 'nerdy guy' says, *"That's exactly what I just said"*. The leader says, *"No, I added this"* (as he raises one hand).

Firestien adds some other reasons why senior management handles new product ideas so poorly:

- 1) *Sometimes leaders have been promoted through other departments and so lack a basic grasp of the concepts involved.*
- 2) *Often they simply don't know the right terms.*
- 3) *In other cases, senior managers have not been taught to deal effectively with new concepts. They have built their entire careers on quick judgments and quarterly returns; they have been taught to evaluate an idea carefully pointing out all its flaws. . .and as a result they never help their product managers overcome the problems that inevitably plague new projects. Managers also may fail to look carefully at the strengths or potential in the new ideas.*

Firestien adds that this is also why most new products are merely extensions of an existing line – *"companies get very good at making better versions of someone else's initiative."*

So does this mean that if top management either doesn't support new ideas and products, or worse, continually gets in the way, that creativity is doomed.

Roger points out, “Yes, managers do have a powerful influence on a subordinate’s creativity – but not all of the influence. Whatever your position, you still have at least a 33 percent change of doing some creative work even if your manager is Darth Vader’s cousin.”

“There is no question that some environments and systems are more conducive to creativity than others. Yet the people who were successful in even less-than-ideal situations had one thing in common: They took personal responsibility for their creativity and made a big difference in the profitability of their companies or divisions.”

Chapter 2 – Fly the Fruitful Skies

According to Firestien, another reason leaders have such a hard time transforming themselves is that because of their past success in climbing the corporate ladder, they “begin to believe in their own infallibility. They are the experts.”

IMPORTANT: *“To become successful leaders today who will continue to be successful tomorrow, we **must become beginners once again**. We must always be growing and learning. We can learn something from everybody. According to Dave Meier, ‘Everyone is our teacher and we are everyone’s learning coach’.”*

Firestien describes twelve ways to nurture your creativity as a leader so you can nurture it in the people who work with you.

One: Develop Creativity Habits

You’ve probably done one of those exercises where you are asked to cross your legs, or your arms, and it’s pointed out that you always do this a certain way. Then when you are asked to reverse the sequence, it feels very awkward. This is Roger’s way of defining a ‘**habit**’. So instead of running with the first idea which comes to mind, as we often tend to do, he suggests we **create the habit of asking ourselves**: “*How else can I do this?*” . . . “*What if . . . ?*” “*How can I use something that doesn’t fit with this at all?*”

Two: Ask Questions

One of the great teachers in insurance (another Roger) used to always say, “*When in doubt, ask a question?*” Firestien defines two types of questions – **Legitimate** ones designed to get more information; **Bogus** ones designed to put subordinates on the defensive. That’s a great way to stifle creativity. His advice: “. . . *Make sure the questions you ask are open, then be ready to receive an answer. . . . The most effective research scientists are not the ones with all the answers, but the ones who ask questions*”.

Three: Use Passive Ways to Generate Ideas

Roger has observed in his workshops (and we’ll be doing this in ours) that some of our best ideas come when we’re in a much more relaxed state – driving a car (not in rush-hour traffic but where the mind can wander). . . bathing . . . falling asleep. Roger

suggests we should take advantage of these ‘automatic activities’ to “*relax the judgmental part of our thinking, thus allowing new ideas to surface.*”

I have a pen that ‘lights up’ when you press the button on the tip (you twist to make it write) and I take this to bed with me where I capture some of my best ideas. Roger also suggests that you can use your own voicemail to capture ideas until you get back to the office.

Four: Vary Your Routine

Roger observes that some of our best ideas come to us while we’re on vacation when you significantly alter your routine. I personally find that when I’m just flying on an airplane, I get some of my best ideas. I have jokingly said that I’m going to recreate the same environment of an airplane – the drone of the engines; knowing the phone won’t ring (at least for now) and sans the screaming baby two rows back. But here are some other good ideas he poses:

- Treat your commute time as a scenic vacation – drive to work a different way – get off the expressway – take a different way. Take MARTA to work or a bus and instead of reading the newspaper, look out the window and let your mind wander.
- Vary your routine at home – you can think of dozens of ways to do this whether it’s going to watch a foreign film; take a long walk. Firestien cites a line of advice by John Gardner, “*On Leadership*” – “*Do something nonverbal.*” That could be *music, nature, sensory enjoyment, working with one’s hands, gardening* (one of my personal favorites), *or sports.*

Five: Read and Listen to a Variety of Material

Roger quotes a study of researchers who were divided into 3 categories:

- **Innovative** – exhibited highest creative productivity as measured by patents
- **Productive** – known for being technically proficient
- **Slugs** – neither innovative nor productive

The study found that the ‘**slugs**’ read almost nothing. The ‘**productive**’ scientists read almost exclusively in their own field, while the ‘**innovative**’ scientists (who weren’t always as technically up-to-date as their productive counterparts) read in a variety of fields.

Don’t think you have time to read, tapes and CD’s are available today on a vast variety of topics, and for those just developing a new career, I can vouch for the value of consistently listening to self-improvement and motivational tapes as I did for probably the first 10 or 15 years of my career. Today I like to plug in on ‘futuristic’ topics across all fields.

Six: Network

Here Roger is stealing a little of my NetWeaving thunder by saying that, “*It is crucial to have in place the personal and professional relationships that can provide you with a support system when the going gets tough.*”

For leaders, this is especially important in that you know the saying, “*It’s lonely at the top.*” And so as Roger points out, “*As a leader you need people to talk with, people with whom you can share your joys and challenges. Nurture those support systems, whether it is family or friends.*”

Eight: Stop the Action

Roger points out that virtually all the great leaders find a way to take “*time out*” in their lives. He tells a great story in a book by Anthony Storr – *Solitude: A Return to Self* wherein he recounted how Admiral Byrd, by himself, manned an Antarctic advanced weather base in the winter of 1934. “*Byrd summed up his long solitude like this: I did take away something that I had not fully possessed before; appreciation of the sheer beauty and miracle of being alive, and a humble set of values. . . I live more simply now, and with more peace.*”

Nine: Create an Environment that Encourages Creativity

What are the environments in which you are most creative? Sitting in a room with a view of the forest or the ocean? In a studio or study of some kind – almost like you were back in college sitting in the college library? I often watch the History Channel when I’m working out on the treadmill and on a recent piece on Mark Twain, I learned he did almost all his writing from his unusually large bed from Italy with an ornate headboard and footboard adorned with figures - cherubs and other hand-carved objects.

As Roger suggests, try and **identify those elements which allow you to do your best work?** Is it with classical music playing; a space filled with light, or dimmed? What’s the best temperature for you – hot, cold, in-between? One which I consider most important is ‘**what time of day are you most productive – so far as creative ideas**’. I find that for me, it’s either very early in the morning or in the early evening – and a beer or glass of wine or two doesn’t seem to hurt either.

Ten: Create a Healthy Lifestyle

According to Firestien, “*The brain requires neurohormones or neurotransmitters in order to function, and it can work only within the confines of the neurotransmitters it has available.*” And since these neurotransmitters are made up of **amino acids** which come from **proteins and complex carbohydrates**, like whole grains, legumes, and whole vegetables, when you increase these ‘**building blocks of neurotransmitters**’ . . . “*your cognitive function increases.*”

And in line with one of my own basic beliefs, Roger points out that regular, rhythmic exercise (once you’ve attained a basic level of fitness) “*releases the neuropeptides, norepinephrine, dopamine, and serotonin. These three neuropeptides significantly aid clearer thinking.*”

Eleven: Reawaken Your Sense of Humor

Have you ever stopped to think that humor and creativity are tied very closely together. Firestien says, “*Humor and creativity bring together two different concepts that*

were originally considered unrelated. In creativity, those unrelated concepts produce a new idea; in humor, those unrelated concepts produce a joke. Therefore, one way to indirectly or directly develop your creativity is to nurture your sense of humor.”

From Dr. Joel Goodman, Director of the HUMOR Project in Saratoga Springs, NY, Firestien shares 5 of Dr. Goodman’s recommendations for developing your sense of humor and thus nurturing your creativity:

- **Develop your comic vision** – Pretend you are Bill Cosby, Allen Funt from the old Candid Camera, or Jerry Seinfeld, and think of any object or event or transaction (the classic Seinfeld – Soup Nazi episode – or remember the chicken salad sandwich sketch – Jack Nicholson in the old movie – “*Five Easy Pieces*”) which you could transform into something humorous. **HINT: this will be one of the fun exercises we will do during the breakout session at our event.**
- **Model a sense of humor** – Goodman cites Herb Kelleher, CEO of Southwest Airlines, as the classic example of a leader with a tremendous sense of humor which permeates the entire organization and has made it the model of the airline industry. Seems like some other CEO’s would ‘get it’ and I think that AirTran is the only other one I can think of following a similar pattern.
- **Be true to yourself** – Goodman points out that for some of us, being a ‘joke-teller’ is not what we’re all about or even any good at. “*Utilize it [humor] according to your own personality and style. . .focus on those things and events in life that tickle your funny bone.*”
- **Humor, like creativity, can be used for positive or negative ends** – Goodman says, “*There’s a difference between laughing **at** others and laughing **with** others. The more a leader can model laughing **with** others and minimize laughing **at** others, the healthier will be the environment for self-esteem, as well as for creativity.*”
- **Let people know that while you are serious about your goals, quotas, and mission, you don’t take yourself too seriously** – Goodman says there’s a difference between being a ‘serious’ vs. being a ‘solemn’ leader. “*We need to be serious professionals, but solemnity doesn’t serve either in the short run or in the long run. Being able to **laugh at yourself** and tell a joke on yourself (where it’s appropriate) helps you not only to **halt destructive self-criticism**, but **helps others take it easier on themselves** as well.*”

Twelve: Be Passionate About Your Positive, Compelling Future Vision

Roger cites a classic research study from a 1953 Yale University Class of students who were asked if they had written down plans to accomplish specific goals in their lives. Only 3% had written them down with plans to accomplish them. Twenty years later when the surviving members were interviewed, the 3% who had written down their goals

were worth more financially than the other entire 97% of the class COMBINED. *“Instead of allowing their future to be predicted by their past, they were ‘pulled’ toward this future by a positive future image. They created something they were passionate about and compelled to do.”*

In my own mind, your ‘**visioning**’ of the future and your development at becoming a more creative person is a JOURNEY which has no beginning and has no end. This book will help you start the journey, or if you’ve already been flying the friendly skies of creativity (or in Roger’s words – “fly the fruitful skies” – this is a book you should pick up and re-read every 6 months or so. That’s what I plan on doing.

Chapter Three – Phrase Problems in a Way They Can Be Solved and **Chapter Four – Don’t Solve the Wrong Problem** all have great material and here I will give some hints as to what’s in those chapters, but for the balance of this Summary, I’m going to focus on several Chapters which offer specific advice on the brainstorming process.

It’s also from the material in these other chapters that we will pull some exercises which we’ll do within the breakout groups.

Chapter Three – Phrase Problems in a Way They Can be Solved

Is Creativity Just Generating Ideas?

- Why isn’t ‘generating’ a lot of ideas the best way to generate ‘breakthrough’ ideas? (page 44)

Our Language Dictates How We View a Problem

- How does our language often get in the way of solving problem and especially stand in the way of deciding ‘where do we start?’ (pp 45 and 46)

Challenge the Problem

- Too many times we end up working on the wrong problem – What does Roger mean by learn to ‘squeeze the challenge further’? (pp. 46-48)

Don’t Play Flavor of the Month (page 49)

I will digress for a second because this is so important. Just I said previously that this transformation into becoming a more creative individual, and as a ‘leader’ to inspire others to become such, is a JOURNEY. As Roger points out here *“Existing support systems are geared to the old organization, so when something new is introduced, some members of the organization are bound to hold back. They don’t get involved. Unfortunately, after a year or eighteen months, management often looks at the program and says, ‘Look we’re getting only minimal outcomes, so let’s go on to something else. Let’s change to another program’.”* . . . *“. . .by failing to follow through and by changing from one program to another, the work force is being trained not to get involved and not to participate”*. . . *“Once a commitment is made to infuse creativity skills into an organization, it is crucial that management commit to the method and enforce and reinforce its use. It must not play ‘flavor of the month’.”*

Keeping the Computer System Up and Running

- How did EDS get 400 employees to buy into a total redo of software while keeping the old system up and running? (p 50-52).

Chapter Four – Don’t Solve the Wrong Problem

Three Helpful Phrases

- What are three helpful phrases which Roger suggests to more clearly define a problem? (pp 52-53)

Withhold Judgment

- Instead of judging a problem after you believe you’ve clearly stated it, why does Roger suggest that instead of ‘**judging**’ it, you should write down thirty ways to **restate** the problem? (page 55)

The “Why-Why Else?” Technique

- Why does this simply questioning technique work so effectively and he gives a good series of questions as an example? (pp 55-59)

Select the Right Problem Statement

- Now, armed with your 30 or 40 problem statements, how can ‘**highlighting**’ help to converge on the key problem statements done in four phases: *hits, relate to form hot spots, paraphrase, and select problem statements*? (pp. 59-61)

The “What’s Stopping Me?” Technique

- How does this technique help you create a broader or more abstract definition of your problem? (pp 61-64)

The Road to Success

- **Challenging our initial definition** of a problem and **developing a variety of ways to approach it** is no easy task. As Roger says, “*It flies in the face of the way we’ve been taught to deal with problems*” which usually has been ‘*jumping to ideas to solve the problem*’. Why does using the 6 steps in the “**Why?**” or “**Why else?**” technique, and the 5 steps in the “**What’s Stopping Me?**” technique help to change your view of a problem. (pp. 64-65)
- In the heading of an earlier chapter, Roger gives one of my quotes by John Dewey – “***A problem properly stated is a problem half-solved***”. I’ve also heard this put – “*A problem well-defined is a problem half-solved*”. I think that came from an old Earl Nightingale tape on creativity I listened to back in the 70’s.

Chapter Five – Phrase Problems in a Way They Can be Solved

According to Roger, “*Judgment, used at the wrong time, is one of the greatest inhibitors of creativity. If you want to become more creative, you must learn to consciously separate your imaginative thinking, from your judgmental thinking. Only in that way will you be able to generate enough ideas to find the breakthroughs you seek.*”

Osborn's Guidelines

Firestien covers the guidelines developed by Alex Osborn, Senior partner in the ad agency BBD&O) and which appeared in the classic book "Applied Imagination":

1. **Defer Judgment** – Criticism is ruled out and withheld until later.
2. **Strive for quantity** – the more the merrier and *the better the chance of discovering useful ideas.*
3. **Welcome "freewheeling"** – the crazier the better. *It's easier to 'tame down that to think up.*
4. **Seek combination and improvement** – *taking the ideas of others and improving upon them and taking two or more ideas which can be fused into still another idea.*

One: Defer Judgment – Firestien cautions that ". . . people confuse ideas with action. An idea is not an action. . . an 'idea' is a 'potential action' that might be taken later, after careful evaluation."

Two: Strive for Quantity - On the topic of '**quantity**', and I saw this at Roger's workshop, he believes in setting a quota for a session such as coming up with 25-40 ideas in 5 minutes. It's amazing that when you're given that as a challenge, the ideas just start pouring out. 100 ideas is not at all out of the question and as Roger says, "*the last 20% really begin to 'push' the envelope.*"

Firestien made an important point about not only '**quantity**' being important but about the magnitude of the ideas. Sometimes **more of** and **smaller** is better when comes to ideas.

He quoted a Japanese study that showed that "*Japanese employees submitted an average of 32.5 ideas per worker, with an implementation rate of 88%. Contrast this to the U.S. workers who submitted an average of .17 ideas per worker annually, with an implementation rate of 37%.*"

U.S. companies tend to encourage and seek to reward big breakthrough ideas where the Japanese tend to encourage any sort of improvement with much smaller awards. The award **per adoption of an idea** was **\$510.67 for the U.S.** vs.. **\$3.20 for the Japanese** but the **Net Savings per 100 employees** was **\$30,261 for the U.S.** vs. **\$683,753 for the Japanese** – a **22 fold advantage.**

Three: Welcoming Freewheeling – Roger has found this one to be one of the most difficult things to get people to do and that includes from his students to corporate CEO's. He believes they often take the task too seriously. He also says that it's difficult to freewheel if we "*. . . don't work in a trusting environment in which we feel comfortable sharing our ideas. We want to remain safe and not appear silly or foolish.*"

Four: Seek Combination and Improvement – Also known as “*building*”: “*Building occurs when problem solvers add to or improve the ideas generated by others in the group.*”

Firestien’s final admonition for a successful brainstorming session: **Check Your Ego at the Door.**

Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight contain much of the meat for what Roger does in his workshops and so I’ll cover those in more detail and for the balance of the book, I’ll pick out a couple of my favorite ‘**pearls of Firestien wisdom**’ and hopefully you’ll find more of your own as you read the book.

Chapter Six – How to Conduct an Idea-Generating Session

No Funny Faces

In starting out Roger warns, “*Don’t criticize your ideas or the ideas of others. Remain open to all possibilities. This, of course, means no sarcasm. Don’t make funny faces at other peoples’ ideas.*” That also means no ‘**rolling your eyes back**’

When You Get Stuck For Ideas, Look Around

As Roger points out, in almost every brainstorming session, there will be pauses where the ideas just seem to quit flowing. Here’s Roger’s solution for this and it works.

The Forced Connections Technique

In an example Roger covers in the book, pretend the brainstorming session is designed to find ways to improve the way information is communicated in your company. The group throws out a number of good ideas but all of a sudden, things start to slow down, and even come to a grinding halt. Then, someone looks around and sees a fresh cheese Danish and the idea comes of printing the latest company information on napkins which are stacked by break room coffee and Danish. Someone else says, how about playing a video in the company cafeteria in the mornings and at the coffee break featuring the company information they’re trying to disseminate.

And the objects don’t have to be actually in the room. During the workshop Roger ran in Sante Fe, as the brainstorming was going on, he was simultaneously running a Power Point Slide Show of a variety of different objects which were completely unrelated to the situation at hand.

Roger also stresses that this technique works just as well when you’re working by yourself, as it does within groups. And, “*the greater the stretch between worlds, the more novel and unique the ideas you will create. So let yourself go and see what wonderful new ideas you can invent!*”

Getting Started

The first step in running a **CPS (Creative Problem-Solving)** session is to do a ‘**warmup**’ exercise to get the process jump-started. In the workshop Roger ran, he put up a slide of a bathtub and within our 6-person groups, we were given 5 minutes to come up with 25 ideas to create the “**perfect bathtub**”. We actually came up with 26 including everything from having the water come up from the bottom, to aroma therapy, a magic hands massage built in, and many, many more. Then Roger repeated the exercise but this time asking for 40 ideas in 5 minutes. By the end, we were really warmed up.

CPS Session Roles

One: Client – He or she is the person who owns the challenge and Roger points out, this can either be the leader, or the entire team. Having the leader with decision-making authority involved is very important according to Firestien to make sure action is taken at the end of the process. Just don’t have the leader be the facilitator.

Two: Facilitator – the facilitator *manages the process and keeps the group moving toward a successful resolution to the challenge*. The facilitator also acts as the secretary writing down all the ideas and Roger emphasizes that he or she should not do any modifying or ‘**improving**’ on the way the person words it. Enter it just as they say it.

Three: Resource Group – these are people who help generate all the ideas. Roger recommends that some of them should be experienced in the CPS process and familiar with the problem at hand, while others should come in totally blind and with no preconceptions or background to be able to offer some fresh perspectives.

The Post-It Note Brainstorming Technique

According to Firestien, this is one of the easiest techniques and involves using “**Post-It Notes**” and a flip-chart and lots of flip-chart paper. People write their ideas on a single post-it note with a felt-tipped pen and they verbalize what they’re writing so others can hear their idea and perhaps play off it or combine it with another idea. Roger also suggests that in addition to getting people to write large, that they think of their ideas as if they were writing a newspaper headline. Brief clarification questions are allowed but be careful not to allow letting them to turn into a discussion of the idea.

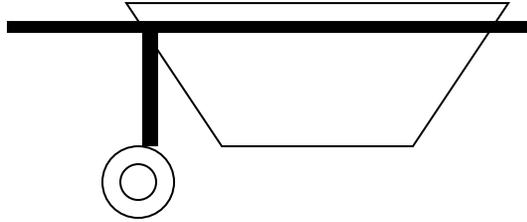
The Brainwriting Technique

Another technique Roger likes is the *Brainwriting technique*. Attached you’ll find a copy of this sheet which appears in the book. One real advantage to this technique, according to Roger, is that persons who are less likely to speak up as in the “**Post-It-Note**” technique, are able to write their ideas down. They don’t verbalize their ideas to the rest of the group. As you look at the form, you see three sets of squares (three on each line). The first row is labeled 1a, 1b, and 1c. The second line is 2a, 2b, and 2c.

As the exercise begins each person writes his or her three ideas in the squares 1a, 1b, and 1c, and then takes the sheet to a central location and picks up another sheet – usually someone else’s sheet although they may actually get their own back. Roger says, “**Think: Three ideas and go! Three ideas and go!**”

Chapter Seven – Evaluate Ideas Positively

New Wheelbarrow Design



When Roger flashed this drawing up on the screen during our session, right on cue, the criticisms began:

- *The hopper is front-heavy*
- *There's no wheel in front*
- *It will be hard to lift*

That's when Roger told us that this wheelbarrow does already exist and it's used for construction of high-rise building where it can easily be maneuvered and turned easily due to the low center of gravity. You push down rather than lift up and it is used to haul items like the big rivets that they use to hold the building together.

What difference does it make?

In another classic study which Roger cited in the book from "*Possibilities Magazine*", Arthur Gordon wrote about the experiences of a friend who belonged to a club at the University of Wisconsin.

It was a group of brilliant boys and some who were already gifted writers. But, when they would read a story or essay, it was 'mercilessly dissected'. "*The critiques were so brutal the club members dubbed themselves 'The Stranglers'*".

A group of women formed a similar group on campus at which they also read their manuscripts out loud, but the criticism was much more gentle and participants looked for kind and supportive things to say. They dubbed themselves, "*The Wranglers*". "*All literary efforts, however feeble, were encouraged.*"

According to Gordon, 20 years later, not a single writer of any significance came out of the "Strangler" group of talented hopefuls, whereas a half-dozen successful writers emerged from the Wrangler group, some of national prominence.

As Roger pointed out, "*Consider the environment for creativity in each of these situations. The amount of raw talent in the two groups was similar. But the Wranglers actively supported each other, while the Stranglers promoted self-criticism, self-disparagement, and self-doubt.*"

Guidelines For Handling Ideas

From “*Creative Approaches to Problem Solving*” by Scott Isaksen, Brian Dorval, and Don Treffinger, Firestien outlined their guidelines for selecting ideas:

- **Use affirmative judgment** – *Look for strengths or positive aspects of an idea first. Only then should you focus on the concerns.*
- **Be deliberate** – *Use a specific strategy for converging on ideas and let the other members know the plan for making decisions.*
- **Don’t overlook ideas that challenge your current assumptions or that are new or intriguing** – *Often these renegade thoughts can lead to new breakthroughs and innovative solutions to problems.*

As Roger reminds us, “*No idea is perfect, but the way you deal with the imperfections of an idea makes the difference between an environment that is conducive to and one that is destructive to creativity.*”

Pluses, Potentials, and Concerns

During the early ‘80’s, a group made up of Diane Foucar-Szocki, Bill Shepard and Roger Firestien developed a tool designed to help workers build on the strengths of an idea, while still addressing the concerns, but without destroying the creative process.

Firestien - *PPC [Pluses, Potentials, and Concerns] is designed to provide a structure for critically evaluating ideas in such a way that both the idea and the person proposing the idea are built up.*

Just as I stress that with “**NetWeaving**”, many persons have been practicing NetWeaving forever – connecting and helping others, as well as providing them with information and resources – ‘no-strings-attached’ as a way of building relationships. So has it been with PPC. We’ve both simply added structure and more practical approaches to a couple simple concepts.

Roger relates the story of a two consultants in the late 1960’s who had heard about a particular president of a company from some of its employees who had attended a seminar where people’s ideas were criticized and ostracized. They encouraged the consultants to come watch how their president handled new ideas both within groups as well as discussions with individuals in completely different ways. They observed:

“When someone proposed an idea, the president would first mention several pluses (strengths, advantages, or good points of the idea). He would then discuss the potentials (spin-offs, opportunities, or possible future gains if the idea were to be implemented). Finally, he would address concerns posed by the idea. But instead of saying that the idea would cost too much, he would challenge the idea by asking, “How might you reduce the cost?” or “How might you raise the money to develop the idea?” Instead of saying, “Management will never accept this idea”, he would rephrase his concern and ask, “How might you get management’s support?””

Chapter 8 -The Power of the PPC

According to Firestien, “*The whole purpose of the **Pluses, Potentials, and Concerns technique** is to harness and direct a group’s affirmative judgment. To apply the PPC technique, you, the problem solver, need an idea or concept that you want to develop. At this stage it is not necessary to have a clear path or strategy of how to implement the idea.*”

One Step At A Time

According to Roger, in applying the PPC technique for considering ideas, it’s very important to take each of the follow steps in exact order with no substitutions:

1. **State the idea you want to develop in the form of an idea phrase** – Roger suggests we preface the idea phrase with, “*What I see myself (us) doing is. . .*” *It tells your brain what the idea might look like in action. Your idea phrase should be written with a specific measurable result in mind (i.e. dollars saved; ‘x’ decrease in product defects, etc.)*
 - some possible ideas he mentions are: **Publish a monthly newsletter, or Have the general manager produce a weekly videotape that is given to all employees.**
2. **List at three good things about the idea-** *traits which are pluses for the idea – the strengths, the positive aspect.*
3. **List the potentials** – *Potentials are spinoffs, speculations, or possible future gains that might result if the idea were implemented. Roger says, “Potentials can be positive or negative but unless it’s a major concern that would keep the idea from being implemented, put it off until the concerns”..*
4. **List the concerns about the idea** – “*Concerns must be worded as problem statement if this technique is to work, and they should begin, “How to. . .?” or “How might I. . .?”*”
5. **Overcome your concerns about the idea** – “*After listing your concerns, generate ways to overcome each of them and Roger goes on to suggest tackling the biggest one first which often eliminates several smaller ones along with it.*”

*After you’ve come up with enough ways to overcome the concerns, review those ideas and develop an improved statement of the solution. “**What I NOW see myself doing is. . .**”.*

6. **Review your action steps and develop a plan** – *Decide what is going to be done, who will do it, by when, and who will check to be sure it is done.*

Roger offers what I consider to be a great ‘script’ for taking an idea up the ladder:

“Here is an idea we have been working on. Here are the pluses or strengths of the idea; here are the potentials of the idea; and oh yes, here are all the concerns we know you might have about the idea. We have developed about twenty ways to overcome each of these concerns and a step-by-step plan for action. When would you like to start?”

An important element of implementing any new idea is “**enlisting the support of others**” and here Firestien references the work of Everett M. Rogers an expert on diffusion of innovations. His broad research has identified **five qualities of innovations** that help to speed their acceptance and subsequent adoption:

1. **Relative Advantage** – *“How much better this innovation is than the idea or product it replaces (i.e. lower cost; decrease in discomfort, or savings in time and effort).”*
2. **Compatibility** – *“Is your idea consistent with the values, past experiences and needs of those individuals or groups who will potentially adopt it?”*
3. **Complexity** – *“How difficult is your idea to understand? – the simpler the better”.*
4. **Trial ability** – *“Allows potential adopters or customers to experiment with the idea before ‘buying’.”*
5. **Observability** – *“Refers to some aspect of your innovation that people can see. If it’s an intangible product, what are the visible results of buying it?”*

On Pages 128 – 133, Roger lays out a worksheet which can be followed to take you through each one of these steps. Remember not to skip any and take them in the exact order he recommends.

For the remaining Chapters of the book, I am simply going to pull out a few gems from each of the chapters Roger wrote which were most useful and important to me. I would recommend that you not only buy the book, but that you do the same and add some of your own.

Chapter Nine – Praise and Recognize Ideas

“I believe that good teachers are good leaders and that good leaders are good teachers. The question is leader, how do you use praise in your organization? How do you use criticism? How do you use praise to help people put items on the agenda instead of using criticism to take things off?”(p. 135)

On the operation of the brain, Firestien observes, “Downshifting is simply a protective device needed for survival. . .Negative criticism causes us to downshift into the reptilian

brain, while praise and recognition prompt us to upshift and use the full power of the neo-cortex. Then we are free to learn. Then we free to create. And then we free to succeed.” (p. 143)

Chapter Ten – Tootsie Rolls, Animal Crackers, and Other Odd Roads to Prosperity

Firestien quotes the work of Tom Peters and Robert Waterman on dispensing praise and recognition:

1. *Make the praise specific – give as much content in your praise as possible.*
2. *Make the praise immediate*
3. *The system of positive feedback in use should take account of achievability*
4. *A good portion of the positive feedback should come in the form of attention from top management.*
5. *Positive reinforcements should be unpredictable and intermittent.*
6. *Recognitions should be smaller and more frequent rather than larger and more rare. (p.152)*

Chapter Eleven - Make Mistakes – and Learn from Them

“. . .whenever you do anything, you create result. A failure is simply a result that you hadn't anticipated.” (p. 166)

“It is probably advisable to change the idea of ‘trial and error’ to ‘trial and learn’.” (p. 166)

“If we look at failures as learning experiences, they actually help us to become more creative.” (p. 170)

“Remember, if you're not making some mistakes, you're not making any discoveries.” (p. 172)

Chapter Twelve – Trial and Error, or Trial and Learn

“One of the biggest obstacles to leaders risking failure is the desire to ‘look good’. We all have a tendency to try to keep up appearances even if it means denying the truth or sacrificing future opportunities. Yet this is so counterproductive.”(p. 184)

“I have often worked with organizations that want the big breakthrough with the potential to turn the company around. Let me revise that. Most of them don't want the ‘big’ breakthrough, they want the ‘fairy-tale’ breakthrough. They want what they're unable to achieve. . .The truth is, if the big breakthrough ever occurred in such a company, its leader probably wouldn't recognize it.” (p. 185)

Chapter Thirteen – You Set the Environment

Firestien described a situation of a creative problem-solving session at which the leader was present for some opening comments and then left – not to be seen for the rest of the day.

What messages did this leave to his employees?

1. *He is much too busy to spend any time in training or in improving his skills.*
2. *He knows all this stuff already; besides, it his people who need to get fixed.*
3. *He doesn't need to be creative, but his people do.*
4. *While this training is simply not worth his valuable time, his employees need to sit through every bit of it. (P. 188)*

“The leader’s behavior in essence trains his employee not to participate, not to apply anything they learned in the seminar.”

“Unsurprisingly, it is the leader who has the single most important influence on an organization’s environment for creativity. The leader’s behavior is the major influence in determining whether an organization will grow to be successful, creative, cutting edge, innovative. . .or stagnate and die.” (p. 189)

I hope you have enjoyed this Summary as much as I enjoyed summarizing Roger’s excellent book. But as Roger points out and this gets back to one of my key points, you have to continually practice ‘**creativity**’ in order to get really good at it.

I also hope you will buy this book and do what I intend to do which is to re-read it at least twice a year and actually because there is a strong relationship between a person’s “referability” (a growing element of NetWeaving) and his or her ‘**creativity**’, I can hopefully see Roger and I actually doing some programs together.

And if your company wants to get on the ‘**cutting edge**’ in innovation and creativity, or stay on it, if you’re already there, I would highly recommend you consider an engagement with Roger and his company – Here’s his contact information:

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